

# Unscripting from Within

## The human void and architectural dissolution in São Pedro de Moel

modernidade latente  
terrain vague  
dissolução arquitectónica  
literacia da suficiência  
heteronímia hermenêutica  
**latent modernity**  
**terrain vague**  
**architectural dissolution**  
**literacy of sufficiency**  
**hermeneutic heteronymy**

Este ensaio examina a dissolução das casas de férias modernistas em São Pedro de Moel, uma pequena povoação costeira no litoral atlântico central de Portugal, onde entre 1954 e 1974 uma convergência notável de condições produziu a normalização quase instantânea da arquitectura moderna. Recorrendo a processos de obras, observação de campo e habitação prolongada do lugar, argumenta que esta dissolução não é primariamente material mas relacional: o que falha não é a arquitectura — que persiste enquanto estrutura legível — mas a ecologia de literacia, desejo e alinhamento temporal que outrora tornou a arquitectura legível e habitável. Invertendo o conceito de *terrain vague* de Solà-Morales, o ensaio propõe que em São Pedro de Moel o território permanece guionizado enquanto o sujeito humano se tornou des-guionizado — transparente a uma arquitectura cujo tempo lento já não corresponde à temporalidade acelerada dos seus habitantes contemporâneos. O padrão resultante de anti-reparação sistemática — a alteração consistente precisamente dos elementos que já funcionavam — é lido não como negligência mas como violência temporal imposta sobre estruturas calibradas para envelhecer, não para serem substituídas. O ensaio introduz o conceito de *modernidade latente* para explicar a recepção original do modernismo, e desenvolve a *heteronímia hermenêutica* — uma metodologia tripartida de Investigador, Testemunha e Narrador — como resposta estrutural a um objecto de estudo que se revela não como edifício ou sítio, mas como situação — e, em última instância, como evento: o arco completo da aspiração colectiva à articulação material à dissolução presente.

This essay examines the dissolution of modernist summer houses in São Pedro de Moel, a small coastal settlement on Portugal's central Atlantic seaboard, where between 1954 and 1974 a remarkable convergence of conditions produced the near-instantaneous normalisation of modern architecture. Drawing on building permits, field observation, and sustained inhabitation of the site, it argues that this dissolution is not primarily material but relational: what fails is not the architecture — which persists as legible structure — but the ecology of literacy, desire, and temporal alignment that once made the architecture legible and inhabitable. Inverting Solà-Morales's concept of *terrain vague*, the essay proposes that in São Pedro de Moel the territory remains scripted while the human subject has become unscripted — transparent to an architecture whose slow time no longer corresponds to the accelerated temporality of its contemporary inhabitants. The resulting pattern of systematic anti-repair — the consistent alteration of precisely those elements that already functioned — is read not as negligence but as a temporal violence imposed upon structures calibrated to age rather than to be replaced. The essay introduces the concept of *latent modernity* to explain the original reception of modernism, and develops *hermeneutic heteronymy* — a tripartite methodology of Investigator, Witness, and Narrator — as a structural response to an object of study that reveals itself to be not a building or a site but a situation — and, ultimately, an event: the full arc from collective aspiration to material articulation to present dissolution.

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## A HOUSE ON THE SLOPE

Approaching from the west, along one of the radial streets<sup>1</sup> that descend from the settlement's main avenue toward the pine forest, the house appears gradually — first its roof-line, cantilevered beyond the façade, then the stone pier that anchors the projecting volume to the steep terrain below. It is a summer house, built around 1960, where the maritime pine forest meets the Atlantic. The site falls sharply. The architect responded by projecting: the main living volume extends outward over the slope in a decisive cantilever, its weight carried visually by a single stone column rising from the garden below. The soffit was originally lined in timber. The balustrade was tubular steel with a wire mesh infill — industrial, light, precise. The window bands were proportioned to frame the canopy of pines and the filtered Atlantic light. On the ground below, rough stone retaining walls shaped a garden of agaves and succulents that belonged to the same material grammar as the house itself. The building permit drawings show the architect's intention with unusual clarity: the house was drawn with its trees, its human figures on the terrace, its topographic section — not as an object placed upon a site, but as a situation inhabited from within.

Today, the cantilever remains. The stone pier still carries the volume. But the timber soffit has been replaced or concealed. The tubular balustrade with its wire mesh has given way to frame-less glass panels held by stainless steel fixings: a solution that belongs to a coastal apartment balcony, not to a terrace above a pine forest. Ochre paint interrupts the chromatic composition. The window profiles appear heavier. A metal gate now mediates what was once a seamless transition between road and garden. None of these alterations is catastrophic. None would register as destruction. And yet the house no longer says what it once said. Its vocabulary has been edited, syllable by syllable, by hands that did not

read the original script — like a text progressively overwritten in a language its editors do not fully command.

This essay examines the conditions that produced that original script, the literacy that sustained it, and the dissolution that is now — intervention by well-intentioned intervention — unwriting it from within.

## THE GROUND THAT WAS ALREADY PREPARED

São Pedro de Moel is a small coastal settlement on Portugal's central Atlantic seaboard, nestled between the Leiria pine forest and the sea. For most of its history it was a seasonal appendage of the inland town of Marinha Grande, whose identity had been shaped since the eighteenth century by the royal glass industry.<sup>2</sup>

The glass factories did more than generate wealth. They produced an *epistemology*: generations of workers and industrialists who understood material through process — viscosity, transparency, the precise moment at which molten glass yields to the shaping hand. This was embodied knowledge, cultivated through daily practice, and it engendered a particular way of seeing — an appreciation for clarity, precision, structural honesty, and the controlled behaviour of light. When the industrial families began building summer houses in São Pedro de Moel, they carried this sensibility with them: a material literacy that would prove decisive for the reception of modernist architecture decades later.

In 1947, the urbanist Lima Franco produced a plan for the settlement that translated its informal spatial logic into a regulatory framework.<sup>3</sup> The plan codified principles already operative in the landscape: the distance between houses, the preservation of sea views, the protection of the pine canopy. Crucially, it established a parcellation — radial streets descending toward the sea, plots

oriented to light and topography — that would provide the spatial grammar within which a new architectural language could emerge. What the plan could not legislate was the desire that would fill those plots. That desire was already forming.

By the early 1950s, the convergence of conditions was remarkable. A community predisposed toward material precision and structural transparency. A regulatory framework that enabled experimentation. And a generation of clients who, returning from Brazil and America with magazines showing Californian houses dissolving the boundary between garden and living room, recognised in those images not foreign imports but *latent possibilities* — things they already knew but had not yet seen built. António Baroseiro, a young architect practising from Marinha Grande, entered this prepared ground in 1952.<sup>4</sup> The speed at which his vocabulary was absorbed reveals something that conventional models of stylistic diffusion cannot explain. In less than a decade, what should have been gradual cultural adaptation condensed into near-instantaneous normalisation. By 1960, Baroseiro was producing five projects simultaneously in São Pedro de Moel, and other architects had entered what had become a laboratory of modern domesticity.

This research terms the conditions that made this possible *latent modernity*: a collective disposition in which a community did not passively receive modernism but actively recognised in it the expression of desires it already held.<sup>5</sup> The literacy that sustained this recognition — the capacity to read sufficiency where speculation sees scarcity, to appreciate a timber window frame for its proportional precision rather than replacing it with something that merely looks newer (Fig.1) — is what this essay calls the *literacy of sufficiency*. It was shared, cultivated, and, for two decades, entirely adequate to the task of inhabiting what had been built (Fig.2). Its dissolution is the subject of what follows.

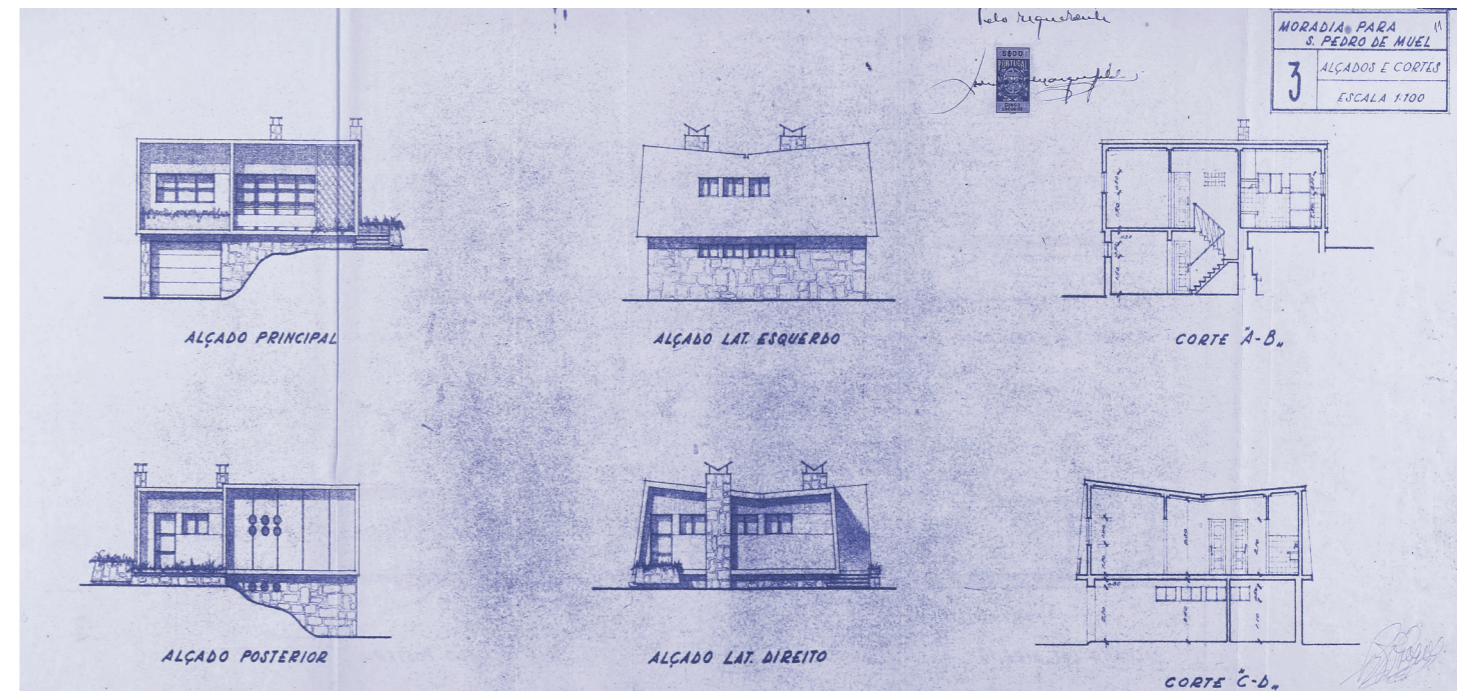


Fig.1 - Summer house, São Pedro de Moel. Elevations and sections, 1954. The building permit specifies 'casquinha' (hardwood) for exterior window frames, with profiles drawn at 1:10 scale — calibrated to disappear within the opening, preserving the proportional relationship between solid and void. Source: Municipal Archive, Marinha Grande, building permit 1954.

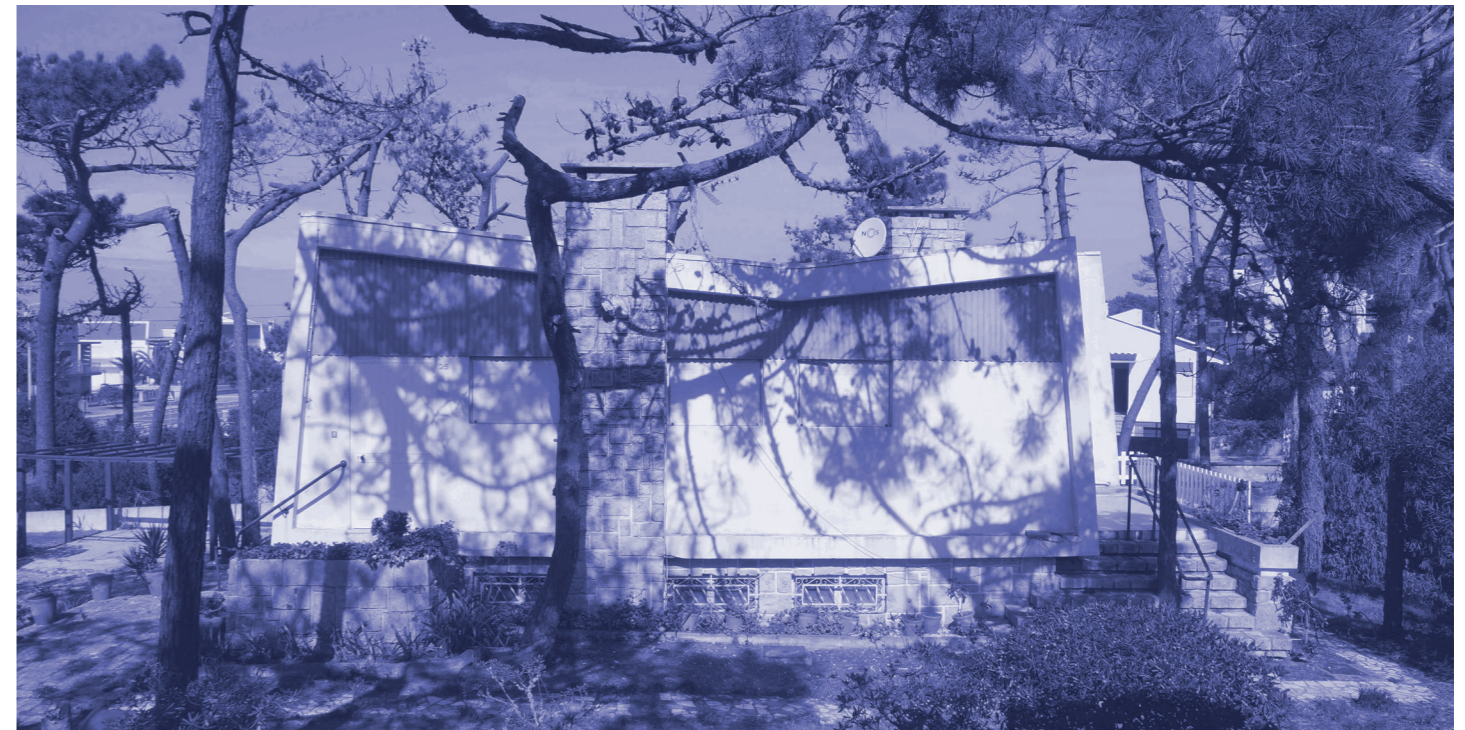


Fig.2 - The same house, 2019. Sixty-five years after construction, the chromatic composition described in the building permit — 'white, grey and red, valorised by the use of different materials and the distribution of volumes' — remains legible. Source: author, 2019.

## THE HUMAN VOID

In a seminal 1995 essay,<sup>6</sup> Ignasi de Solà-Morales gave a name to a particular kind of urban condition: the *terrain vague*. Drawing on the double etymology of the French *vague* — from *vacuus* (empty, available) and *vagus* (wandering, uncertain) — he described spaces that had slipped out of the productive circuits of the city:

abandoned sites, derelict yards, residual interstices where former functions had ceased and new ones had not yet arrived. For Solà-Morales, the *terrain vague* was defined by a fundamental condition: the withdrawal of architecture. Where architecture retreats, the terrain becomes vague. These were cool ruins — spaces stabilised by time, softened by patina, available for aesthetic contemplation and

creative re-imagination.

São Pedro de Moel does not fit this diagnosis. Its modernist summer houses, built largely between 1954 and 1974, have not been abandoned. They remain inhabited, used, transformed — and yet something here is unmistakably vague. The condition, however, does not reside in the territory. The architecture is still



Fig.3 - The same house, 2024. Material weathering has advanced — concrete staining, paint erosion — but the architectural script persists: volumetric articulation, proportional openings, the dialogue between stone base and rendered upper volume. The house ages; it does not yet dissolve. Source: author, 2024.

present: its concrete frames, its flat roofs, its calculated openings persist, however altered, as legible structures (Fig.3). The architecture operates in slow time — material, tactile, calibrated to endure. The subject who now inhabits it moves at another speed entirely — accelerated, visual, oriented toward models that belong elsewhere. What has become vague is neither the ground nor the subject alone, but the temporal gap between them. And what we find here are not cool ruins but hot ones — dissolution that is active, contemporary, unfolding in real time, without the patina that permits contemplation. In São Pedro de Moel, the terrain is scripted. It is the human who is unscripted.

This human vagueness is not the contemplative wandering of the flâneur. It is an anxious errancy — a restless passage through things

without the capacity to dwell within what they offer. Desire has been displaced toward suburban models, toward solutions seen in emerging urban peripheries, and is now addressed to a structure that was never designed to accommodate it. These subjects are, in a phenomenological sense, transparent: they occupy space without inhabiting it, present without being opaque enough to enter into dialogue with what the architecture proposes. The architecture still exerts its gravitational pull — but the transparent subject lacks the mass to be captured by it, passing through the field without entering orbit. Where Solà-Morales identified a vagueness born from the absence of inhabitation, what emerges here is its uncanny inverse: a vagueness produced by presence itself.

This transparency materialises.

It translates into a pattern of intervention that might be called systematic anti-repair: the consistent alteration of precisely those elements that already functioned.<sup>7</sup> Original timber window frames, designed in proportion to the façade and to the Atlantic light, are replaced with oversized PVC profiles that interrupt the compositional logic of the elevation (Fig.4). Exposed concrete — left deliberately unfinished as an expression of material honesty — is clad in ceramic tiles imported from a suburban repertoire. A veranda is enclosed, severing the threshold between interior and forest. Each intervention presents itself as an improvement. Each one damages what was already sufficient — not out of negligence, but out of a desire addressed to the wrong structure. Each act of anti-repair is a temporal violence: the imposition of fast time — industrial production,



Fig.4 - PVC window frames awaiting installation at the same house, November 2025. The profile thickness exceeds the original hardwood frames — specified by the architect at 1:10 detail — by a factor of three. The intervention was undertaken without a building permit. Source: author, 2025.

planned obsolescence — upon slow time calibrated to age, not to be replaced (Fig.5).

The process is cumulative and self-reinforcing. Each act of anti-repair diminishes the legibility of the original script. As proportions are altered and materials replaced, the house loses the capacity to communicate the logic of its own making — and the next inhabitant arrives into a dwelling yet more opaque to reading, yet more likely



Fig.5 - The same house during intervention, November 2025. Uniform white replaces the original chromatic differentiation. New window profiles designed for continental thermal performance occupy openings calibrated for Atlantic light. The building permit's promise — 'simple and without artifice, valorised by different materials and colours' — is being overwritten in real time. Source: author, 2025.

to be subjected to further erosion. The spiral feeds itself: transparency breeds anti-repair, anti-repair breeds illegibility, illegibility breeds deeper transparency. What Solà-Morales diagnosed in the abandoned margins of the European metropolis finds here a more disquieting counterpart: a vagueness produced not by the absence of architecture, but by the inability of its inhabitants to inhabit what remains.

## FROM SITUATION TO EVENT

The call for this issue proposes that unscripted grounds be approached as *situations* rather than merely as *sites*: knots of material, social and symbolic relations that become legible through attentive engagement with place. This distinction proves decisive for São Pedro de Moel. As long as it is treated as a site — a collection of buildings to be catalogued, an architect's oeuvre to be documented — it yields a familiar architectural history. But when approached as a situation, what becomes legible is

something else: not the buildings alone, but the event of their making and unmaking — the constellation of desires, literacies, and temporal rhythms that brought this architecture into being and are now dissolving it from within. The object of inquiry shifts. It is no longer the architect, António Baroseiro. It is no longer the place. It is the event — the full arc from latent aspiration to material articulation to present dissolution — that constitutes the true object of study.

For two decades, this normalisation was sustained by a shared literacy. The architect was the catalyst; the place was the laboratory; but the event was the convergence itself — the singular occasion in which creative practice met a prepared ground and produced an architecture that was both legible and lived. Normalisation, however, carries within it a paradox. The more completely a new architectural language is absorbed into everyday life, the more invisible its founding logic becomes. When modernism became simply the way things were, the literacy that had made its reception possible was no longer cultivated — because it was no longer perceived as necessary. The script became background. And it is precisely when this background is disrupted — when aluminium cuts through concrete, when ceramic tiles seal what was left deliberately open — that the original logic resurfaces, legible now only by contrast with what violates it.

What, then, is the truth that dissolution makes accessible? Following Deleuze's reading of Proust — where the search is oriented not toward the recovery of the past but toward a truth that only the present can unlock<sup>8</sup> — we propose that the dissolution of these houses reveals what architecture was, in its deepest sense. Architecture was never the concrete, the timber frames, the calculated openings — though it required all of these. Architecture was the convergence: the occasion in which a community's latent aspiration met a practitioner capable of giving it form, in a place

whose conditions allowed that form to be recognised, inhabited, and sustained. Architecture was the relation, not the object. This truth remained invisible for as long as the convergence held. It is only now, when the human void has hollowed the houses from within, that the full scope of what has been lost becomes legible — not a collection of buildings, but an entire ecology of making, reading, and dwelling together. The dissolution is not the origin of this truth, but it is the optic through which the origin becomes retrospectively intelligible.

## POSITIONALITY AND METHOD

The recognition that the object of study is an event carries immediate methodological consequences. A conventional survey would catalogue the houses. A historical monograph would reconstruct the architect's career. Neither would access what this research has identified as its true object: a truth that resides in the relation between what was made, how it was inhabited, and why that inhabitation is now failing. The method had to be discovered rather than imposed. It emerged from the sustained experience of witnessing dissolution — from years of walking through São Pedro de Moel as its houses were progressively unscripted, documenting what was being erased before erasure became normalised,<sup>9</sup> and responding to an ethical imperative of testimony in a context where cultural memory is actively dissolving.<sup>10</sup>

The resulting methodology — developed over three years of sustained engagement with São Pedro de Moel and theorised here as *hermeneutic heteronymy*<sup>11</sup> — operates through three distinct yet interconnected stances, each accessing a different dimension of the event. The *Investigator* practises a documentary archaeology: excavating building permits, construction details, professional networks, and material chronologies — the sedimented evidence of a convergence already past. The *Witness* operates as a surrogate for the vanished literate inhabitant — the last reader of a script that the current occupation is actively discarding. Walking through the houses as they dissolve, registering atmospheres, proportions, and the precise quality of light through openings that were designed for it, the Witness exercises a memory of literacy rather than claiming a privileged position of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

The *Narrator* reconstructs the event retrospectively, weaving archaeological evidence and lived testimony into an interpretive synthesis — not through explanation alone but by enacting the relational structure of the event for the reader.<sup>13</sup> In this essay, the three stances are already operative before being named. *The Ground That Was Already Prepared* is predominantly the Investigator's territory: building permits, urban plans, archival chronologies. *The Human Void* belongs to the Witness: the phenomenological encounter with anti-repair, the

registered atmospheres, the fieldwork dialogue documented in note 7. *From Situation to Event* is where the Narrator synthesises both registers into the interpretive recognition that the event — not the building, not the place — constitutes the true "object": not a thing to be catalogued but a situation that has unfolded in time. The voices do not alternate in strict sequence; they inflect one another. But their structural distinctness prevents any single register from colonising the inquiry. This plurality is not eclecticism but a structural response to an object that changes depending on the position from which it is observed. It carries an ethical commitment: to document dissolution without nostalgising it — to testify to what is being lost without pretending that testimony alone can arrest the loss.

## THE LAST READERS

Return, now, to the house on the slope. The cantilever still projects over the pine garden. The stone pier still carries its weight with the same structural conviction it held in 1960. But the frameless glass balustrade that has replaced the original tubular steel and wire mesh (Fig.6) can no longer be read as mere aesthetic substitution. After the argument this essay has developed, it becomes something else: a confession. It is the material evidence of a subject who cannot tolerate mediation — who requires literal transparency because the phenomenological transparency that once connected inhabitant

to landscape through calibrated openings, proportioned frames, and the deliberate filtering of light has been lost.

The wire mesh mediated: it allowed air, view, and the sound of wind through pines while maintaining the tactile boundary between terrace and forest. The frameless glass eliminates mediation altogether — and in doing so, eliminates precisely the relation it was meant to enhance. It is not an improvement. It is a symptom.

This diagnosis carries consequences for architectural practice that exceed the particular case of São Pedro de Moel. If the dissolution documented here is not primarily material but relational — if what fails is not the building but the ecology of literacy, desire, and temporal alignment that once made the building legible — then conventional responses are structurally inadequate.

Heritage conservation, as currently practised, preserves fabric while ignoring the conditions that made that fabric meaningful. Urban regulation controls form while remaining silent about the cultural competences required to inhabit it. Neither addresses the core problem: that the *terrain vague* identified in this essay resides not in the territory but in the hiatus between territory and subject.

The call for this issue invites new ways of engaging with unscripted grounds. What São Pedro de Moel suggests is that re-scripting cannot be achieved through design alone. If the script was produced by a convergence of material literacy, tacit aspiration, and creative articulation, then its recovery demands that architecture extend its agency beyond the production of space toward something more difficult: the re-cultivation of the capacity to dwell within what is already sufficient. This is not a nostalgic programme. It is an epistemological one. And it begins, as this essay has tried to show, with learning to read what remains — before the last readers, too, are gone.

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## NOTES

- The radial street pattern derives from the 1947 urbanisation plan by Lima Franco. See FRANCO, J.D.L. *Urbanização de São Pedro de Moel: Ante-Plano. Peças Desenhadas e Memória Descritiva e Justificativa*. 1946. Arquivo Municipal, Marinha Grande.
- On the broader context of Portuguese urbanisation plans, see LÔBO, Margarida Souza. *Planos de Urbanização: A Época de Duarte Pacheco*. Porto: FAUP Publicações, 1995.
- The royal glass factory was established in Marinha Grande in 1769 under the Marquis of Pombal. On the epistemological dimensions of industrial production and material culture, see SIMONDON, Gilbert. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. Paris: Aubier, 1958.
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- Baroseiro's first documented project in São Pedro de Moel is the Casa Aníbal Henrique Abrantes (1952). The broader context of his practice is the subject of the doctoral dissertation from which this essay derives.

5. The concept of *latent modernity* synthesises Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling" (WILLIAMS, 1977, pp. 128–135), Ernst Bloch's "not-yet-conscious" (BLOCH, 1986 [1959], pp. 113–178), Michael Polanyi's tacit knowledge (POLANYI, 1966, p. 4), and Charles Taylor's concept of articulation (TAYLOR, 1989, pp. 91–107). Full development belongs to the doctoral research from which this essay derives.

6. SOLÀ-MORALES RUBIÓ, Ignasi de. *Terrain Vague*. In: DAVIDSON, Cynthia C. (ed.). *Anyplace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995, pp. 118–123.

7. The gap between literacy and illegibility was made explicit during fieldwork in November 2025, when the author documented the replacement of original hardwood frames with PVC profiles at a house designed in 1954. The intervention was proceeding without a building permit. When confronted, the contractor asked whether "a permit was needed to paint a house" — unable to distinguish between surface maintenance and the destruction of a compositional system calibrated at 1:10 scale. The author's response — whether the windows being carried into the garage were intended for another house — registers the same perception from the opposite side of the literacy divide. Both parties looked at the same object and saw different things.

8. DELEUZE, Gilles. *Proust et les signes*. Paris: PUF, 1964. Deleuze argues that Proust's *Recherche* is not a novel about memory but a search oriented toward truth — the search is directed forward, not backward.

9. The urgency of documenting erasure before it becomes normalised resonates with Said's argument for the ethical necessity of testimony. See SAID, Edward W. Permission to Narrate. In: *Journal of Palestine Studies*. 1984, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 27–48.

10. On the imperative of testimony in moments of cultural dissolution, see BENJAMIN, Walter. The Storyteller. In: ARENDT, H. (ed.). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1969, pp. 83–109.

11. The term draws on Fernando Pessoa's literary heteronyms — ontologically distinct perspectives, each with its own coherence — transposed into a hermeneutical framework informed by GADAMER (2004 [1960]) and RICOEUR (1992). Full theorisation is developed in the doctoral dissertation from which this essay derives.

12. The Witness does not claim epistemological superiority but exercises a reconstructed literacy — assembled through years of research, observation, and sustained inhabitation — that functions as a surrogate for the collective literacy the community no longer cultivates.

13. The term "enacts" is used in its epistemological sense: the Narrator's writing performs the relational structure of the event, rendering visible connections that no single voice could produce alone. On narrative as knowledge production, see RICOEUR, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 1. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.



Fig.6 - Summer house on the slope (Sections 1 and 6), composite. Left: original state — tubular steel balustrade, wire mesh, timber soffit, terraced garden. Right: current state — frameless glass, stainless steel fixings, metal gate. The structure endures; the script has been overwritten. Sources: private archive (left); author, 2024 (right).